

Sarah Mac, a Beloved Oddball

By TONY KELSO

Mid-winter weather has always been tough on the people who live on the fringes of society. Duxbury in the early 1800s, like most small New England towns, had its share of characters and eccentrics who were not part of the respectable society of the town, but were well known and accepted by the townspeople. This was an era when care for the poor, aged and oddballs, especially those without family or wealth, often fell upon neighbors. The only other alternative was the Almshouse, which stood on Depot Street near Prior Farm Road. In 19th century Duxbury, the most familiar eccentric about town was a woman by the name of Sarah Mac.



Sarah Mac's life is a fascinating glimpse into the struggles of daily life in Duxbury if you were not a Weston or a Bradford. Sarah Mac's full name was Sarah MacFarlane, and she was born in 1739 either in Duxbury or Pembroke where the MacFarlane clan is still numerous today. Sarah Mac acquired an education in a time when many women did not, and even rose to become a teacher in the village school of Duxbury in the decades before the Revolution. She was clearly a well-loved teacher, since some of her pupils later cared for her and perpetuated her memory. She was fortunate that her main benefactors were the Bradfords, Westons and Aldens, Duxbury's ruling families.

In 1785 Sarah was given a small knoll of land at the corner of Alden and Tremont Streets. She somehow got a house built for herself, although it could more accurately be described as a "hovel," a one story building chinked up against the winter winds by a lifetime of clutter. The location gave her a strategic spot from which to observe not only the comings and goings of the town, but also the foot traffic to her near neighbors, Duxbury's minister, doctor and lawyer. After her teaching

days were over, she lived here with her cow "Blossom," her numerous cats and her elderly chickens. Blossom was a tough scrawny thing who delighted in kicking over both Sarah and buckets of fresh milk.

As part of her subsistence living, Sarah Mac "visited" various households during the day, where she helped with housework, children, chores and the sick. Sarah immortalized her work with the doggerel: "I feed their cats, I chase their bats, I mind their brats and kill air rats."

Sarah stood out amongst other local eccentrics by her ability to turn anything into a rhyming poem. She lived in an era without daily newspapers, so the ability to encapsulate news and situations, even mundane ones, in verse that could be repeated was a prized talent. Sarah Mac would put everything from Napoleon's wars to that week's sermon into a poem. She would buttonhole anyone who would listen and so gained an appreciative

audience for her wit and uncanny ability to skewer a situation. Reverend John Allyn, the long time minister at the First Parish church, was a firm friend of Sarah's but often was the object of her cutting verse.

Another one of Sarah Mac's skills was as a healer. She was an herb woman who knew where all the wild herbs grew. Many remembered her with her arms and apron full of high and low wintergreen gathered on the slopes of North Hill. She wandered wherever she wished regardless of private property. One of her favorite gatherings were cranberries and after repeated warnings to leave other people's cranberries alone, she is said to have replied, "Men make laws but I don't mind 'em, I pick cranberries where I find 'em."

There is even a drawing of Sarah Mac, showing her dressed in her "old fashioned" red cloak and pinched black bonnet walking with her signature stout cane.



Sarah Mac lived independently until age 90, thanks perhaps to her sharp wit.

Sarah Mac struggled to live on her own until she was 90 in 1829. Despite the care of her neighbors, she moved to the Almshouse where she died at 92 on May Day 1831. She gave to the single women in the Almshouse her clothes and straw beds with each to have an equal share. Her last wish bequeathed her "good will to all Christians."

Her former students put up a gravestone to Sarah Mac in Mayflower Cemetery and perpetuated her memory even 20 years after her death by publishing a small newspaper called "Sarah Mac's Budget" that reproduced her story, her image and many of her doggerel poems. As we appreciate our snug homes this winter, the legacy of Sarah Mac one hundred and seventy years after her death is simple: A town needs to support and care for its own - with affordable housing, caring neighbors and an appreciation of a person and their eccentricities, especially if they do not live in a fancy house or are not from the most important of families.